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Carter irked by CIA, demands better data

By Robert C. Toth
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WASHINGTON — President Jimmy Carter, declaring himself "not satisfied" with US intelligence reporting after its failure to warn of the turmoil in Iran, has ordered his three top national security aides to improve the political analysis reaching his desk "as soon as possible."

Beyond the immediate case of Iran, the larger issue behind the President's criticism is whether the intelligence failure was an isolated incident or a dangerous example of the sad state of the Central Intelligence Agency today, following successive scandals, personnel firings, and five directors in as many years.

The latter, if true, would have critical national security implications for the United States.

Carter's hand-written directive, dated Nov. 11, went to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, national security assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Central Intelligence chief Stansfield Turner. But, implicitly, its criticism was mainly aimed at Turner, who, as CIA director, has primary responsibility for political intelligence collection and analysis.

It was a top-secret, 23-page CIA as-

essment of the Iranian situation in mid-August that explained the sanguine attitude of the US government — now so embarrassing to the White House — toward events in that key oil-producing state until two weeks ago.

Among the CIA's conclusions, made well after the rioting had begun there, was that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even prerevolutionary situation."

"Those who are in opposition, both violent and nonviolent, do not have the capability to be more than troublesome," the CIA document said. "There is dissatisfaction with the shah's tight control of the political process, but this does not threaten the government."

These assessments were obviously wrong. Hindsight criticism may seem unfair, but there were at least several scholars and private business consultants who, in August and even earlier, warned of the impending chaos in Iran.

"In February, it was clear things were getting out of hand," one such consultant said in an interview this week. "The upper classes were taking money out of the country. But our embassy there insisted there would be no trouble."

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"In August, it was far worse," he continued. "Senior civil servants told me openly the shah must go, and were saying it in groups, not just singly. But our people (US officials) were just taking handouts from the Iranian court and listening only to the SAVAK (Iranian secret police)," he complained.

These warnings are said to have reached the ears of Brzezinski, but he either chose to accept the CIA assessment or was unable to challenge it. But a more important point is that these private observers were reaching their conclusions with the expenditure of far less money and without the services of 1700 political analysts.

The State Department, with its huge embassy in Tehran and an intelligence and research division, has also been faulted. Its Iranian assessment did not differ significantly from the CIA's and blame has been leveled at US Ambassador William Sullivan.

Some officials believe that if the CIA's assessments of August or earlier had been different, the Administration could have counseled a go-slow policy to the shah on expanding civil liberties there.

These officials contend that the release of political prisoners and the promise of free elections by the shah, partly in compliance with Carter's human rights policies, contributed to the undoing of the civilian government.

Carter Administration dissatisfaction with the CIA's performance dates back at least to the start of this year, when Brzezinski sent Turner a long memo complaining about poor political intelligence coming out of the agency.

It is not certain that Carter knew of Brzezinski's critical memo at the time, but it is considered likely that he did.

In any case, Turner's response did not satisfy Brzezinski for reasons that were not disclosed. It was said, however, that Turner told Brzezinski that the President had made no complaints to him.

So the President's sharp note of Nov. 11, addressed to the three aides by their nicknames ("Cy, Zbig and Stan"), may have burst what was called Turner's complacency about his personal rapport with the President based on the fact that they were classmates at Annapolis.

Turner and Brzezinski have long been at odds personally as well as professionally, and Carter's note led to increased hostility between them, Turner accusing Brzezinski of having initiated the note and of blaming his own "deficiencies" on Turner.

The Senate and House intelligence committees are already planning inquiries into the apparent US intelligence failure in Iran. They have already examined the US failure to predict the coup in Afghanistan last April.